

REMEMBRANCE

Ronald Simoneau--"Libertee Belle"

November 22, 2019: 7:30 p.m.

Lib was a friend of mine, starting with the fact that we shared some memories of MCC from before either of us were here in Birmingham. Lib was from my neck of the woods. I had pastored in Boston some years ago and I guess he realized the insanity of having a French last name in the elitist land of the Cabots and Lodges. You never really belong in New England unless you are solidly Anglo-, preferably having arrived on the Mayflower, with a name to prove it. I really understand that feeling. I am female clergy in a predominantly gay church and few people want anyone who's that far out. I also have an Italian last name in the South. You can't imagine the pronunciations I get. I knew that feeling of not being accepted by everyone, especially not in our community. We could relate! Lib was a member of my church. I better rephrase that so you don't get a bad idea of Lib. Lib never actually **joined** the church, in the sense of getting up in front and being accepted as a member. Lib was a lifelong Catholic and wasn't about to change that. Lib just knew he was accepted and cared about and belonged. He came regularly when we were in Woodlawn and pretty regularly when we moved to Roebuck and he'd call for a ride. Lib almost always came in a suit and tie. Only once did he come in his working drag, when he had a show immediately after the evening service. As he put it, "You treated me with respect and dignity and I hope I returned that".

He naturally always carried a plastic coke cup. One knew better than question what was in it. It was his security blanket. We all have one or have needed one. For some of us, our security in in our traditional values, money, jobs, educational status. Lib could not have cared a whit about then. Oh, sure, he missed not having them, but if he had had them, he'd have lost them, given them away or somehow thrown them away, having them really wasn't that important.

He was desperately afraid of growing old, because he felt our community doesn't care a lot about its senior men. We call them "trolls" and we make fun of them when they salivate about some young person they have a crush on, because "my



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and I were talking about the years in early MCC when we had had a rash of church fires, and our denominational magazine had an article, "Pastor, Your Church is on Fire," and what to do about it. We had found that most of those fires weren't set by outsiders, they were set by our own people, often by our members. GLBTQ self-hatred came out in a lot of ways in those days. Lib was very aware of it. We do a lot of harm to ourselves. Lib and I are of the generation where we were taught that being any kind of "different," also carried the idea of being "bad." We were taught so and we grew up believing it -- and we set about trying to live up to it by being the worst possible people we could be. I think Ronnie created "Libertee Belle" his alter ego, where he could live out that sense of never being good enough and always needing to be bad. It allowed Ronnie to separate that side of himself and both love and hate her, the monstrous drag queen who really shouldn't exist. Because, under that exterior, was an eternally hopeful kid who dreamed of a world that really ought to be. Ronnie would have loved to have been a saint and covered that up with a harridan in horrible makeup, so no one would see the gentle, aspirational being he was afraid would be laughed at and even demolished for being an idealist in our community.

He loved this crazy community we belong to in a way that demanded that he argue for it, about it, with it and take on the governing forces wherever he found them -- although admittedly talk radio was his favorite place to argue. And Lord he loved to argue!

He cared enough for this community to once run for City Council, knowing that he was Don Quixote tilting at windmills. He had been a crusading activist for a long time before Birmingham and once said, "We have the capacity to be the most caring, loving people the gods or goddesses ever created. Without each other we stand alone. Sadly, even with each other, some of us still stand forlorn. This should not be." I wonder if Lib had a premonition that even in death he would find himself alone.

So, we will miss Ronnie Simoneau's Alter Ego, the fabulous and fabulist (a fancy world for one telling untrue tales about themselves) Libertee Belle, creating a mean and vicious character who lied about who he was to cover up the tender

God, you're too old to have a crush." But we do. Our community loves a pretty face and a pretty body. My Shirley once nearly fell out of a car window admiring a grey-haired woman runner, and I know she would have loved to get to know that lady better, even when she was age 75. It cuts across genders and ages and sexualities.

Lib once thought seriously about a gender change when she was young. She was the "secretary" to Rev. Austin Amerine, one of our pioneer MCC pastors. She loved the idea of being Austin's "secretary!" I imagine the word conveyed ideas of some gorgeous Girl Friday, sitting on Austin's knee taking dictation. We all have our fantasies!

Ronnie created "Libertee Belle," once saying that the Belle was everything a drag queen shouldn't be. "Libertee Belle" allowed a skinny little kid from New England to have an avatar who could fight his battles. Ronnie had been a yoeman in the Navy, was proud that he had served, had served honorably and was open about who he was. He did what he felt he had to do when he had to do it. Lib also once wanted, at a very early point in his life, wanted to be a priest and he and I would talk about the Church, about both its glories and the miserable failure it had been to GLBTQ people. Lib trusted MCC not to make that mistake in the same way that I trusted it. Churches are only as good as the people who lead them and the congregations that people them. We, all of us who belong to the church, leaders or laity need to be **who** the people who see and hear us expect us to be. Lib thought if we are walking around telling the world that we represent Christ, we better not disappoint the people like Lib who expect us to be Christ for them.

At Covenant, and later at Bethel, we loved Lib. We helped Lib and we failed Lib, by not following up with him through the years. We both got older and unfortunately life does that to us. We're all capable of failure. We can never, not ever, be as good as Lib hoped people could be. Lib was an undying optimist with great expectations. And I think Lib accepted that.

In an article, in his wonderful, "Under the Barstool," he once said "Unfortunately a lot of the hatred we have experienced has been perpetuated by ourselves." Lib

soul he really could be. I'm going to miss ALL the Libertee Belle's I knew, the mean queen and the tender kid, the crusading activist and the gentle Christ lover, and while his name wasn't on the church rolls, he was a church MEMBER to me. Loving. faithful, giving whatever he could, allowing us to minister to him, because we could see Ronnie under Libertee's stage makeup and love both of them. So let's all whisper a prayer to whatever gods or goddesses we and Lib worship, pray for the immortal soul he was and is, and maybe lift a glass in his memory. He'd like that!

Amen.

